Airing Grievances: Academic Hoaxing and the Performance of Boundary Work

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ABSTRACT   Through an examination of the 2018 "grievance studies" hoax this essay considers the role hoaxing plays in the articulation of both internal and external modes of institutional critique that pertain to the production, verification, and dissemination of knowledge. By examining the grievances of three academics who wrote over twenty false/fraudulent articles—seven of which were published in (and later retracted from) peer-reviewed journals—this research attends to the different kinds of boundary work and repair that are performed and enacted by academics to shed light on the conflicting ways knowledge production and academic labour are currently contextualized and understood.

KEYWORDS   academia, boundary work, discourse, grievance studies, hoaxing, peer review, publishing

Introduction

The use of deception has proven to be a defining feature of contemporary life, particularly within the realm of news and information online.[1] The widespread circulation of misleading, fabricated, erroneous, and fraudulent stories and information via networked digital media platforms continues to influence popular discussion and debate surrounding the current state of public discourse.[2] One branch of these deceptive practices—the hoax—warrants specific attention. As acts of mischievous or humorous deception, hoaxes of all kinds have materialized online through the careful selection of targets and the clever subversion of perceived truths or reality.[3] The prevalence of hoaxing has left many journalists and news media vulnerable to attack, with the latter falling prey periodically to deceptions of various stripes. In the instances when news media have been intentionally fooled by media hoaxers, the former systematically engage in the performance of paradigm repair[4] and boundary work[5], that is, in the shoring up of their own credibility, trustworthiness, and importance. Any real or perceived harm created by a given hoax is minimized, with the reputation of the journalist, news organization, and profession cast as remaining securely intact.

Of late, hoaxing has also taken wing in academia, creating momentary ruptures in the fabric of academic life and culture.[6] When academic hoaxes do materialize, academics respond in kind with their own forms of paradigm repair and boundary work. Because hoaxes in academia tend to generate broad news media coverage, they offer a unique point of departure for exploring the features and bugs of boundary work and repair among academics. Through an examination of the 2018 "grievance studies" hoax, this essay considers the role hoaxing plays in the articulation of both internal and external modes of institutional critique that pertain to the production, verification, and dissemination of knowledge. By examining the grievances of three academics who wrote over twenty fraudulent articles—seven of which were accepted for publication in (and later retracted from) peer reviewed journals—this research attends to the different kinds of boundary work and repair that are performed and enacted by academics to shed light on the conflicting ways knowledge production and academic labor are currently contextualized and understood. The hoax represents an elaborate and sophisticated deception aimed to discredit the scholarly publishing activities of

humanities and social sciences researchers. As Reilly (2020) notes, "the group devised and followed a loose set of criteria, with each hoax article having to engage at least one or more of the following: a humorous tone, ludicrous or outrageous theses, lack of rigor, amateurish construction, and little understanding of the field."[7] Articles on dog park canine rape culture, "breastaurants," fat bodybuilding, and a "feminist rewrite of a chapter from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*," among others, were submitted to targeted journals in cultural studies, critical theory, and gender studies—so-called "grievance studies" scholarship "based less upon finding truth and more upon attending to social grievances."[8] This hoax incited a wide array of responses from academics across the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, among other faculties and disciplines. Of specific interest and concern to scholars who published public commentary on the hoax were issues surrounding the corruption of scholarship, critique of the peer review system, and the anomalous nature of the hoax. What emerged through the performance of boundary work was a more comprehensive defense of the institution of peer review and a more nuanced debate regarding academic norms and rigors.

Situating Academic Hoaxing

To better contextualize the contours of this complex hoax, this study begins with an overview of academic hoaxing and boundary work, before turning to a broader examination of the "grievance studies" hoax. The term *hoaxing* can conjure up all kinds of associations and proclivities. For Kingwell, hoaxing is likened to the following: "A gag, a goof, a blindfold; a spoof, a jape, a deceit; deliberate equivocation; fakery, impersonation, infiltration. Pretending what is not the case. The triumph of appearance over reality."[9] Given its protean malleability as a cultural form and practice, hoaxing continues to draw much appreciation and derision for its ability to drum up notoriety, spectacle, and scandal. If hoaxing refers at once to "humorous or mischievous deception" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and to "an act intended to trick or dupe; something accepted or established by fraud or fabrication" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*), we can begin to appraise core features and dynamics, such as intentional trickery, deception, and fabrication. Hoaxing is rarely a benign activity, with many of its practitioners seeking to shore up notoriety and fame.[10] Adding to the stakes of such activities, hoaxing involves the careful engineering of a "public form of deception."[11] Part of the attraction to, and repudiation of, hoaxing is tied to the form's guile and artfulness: "Not bound by the facts, the hoax is free to fabricate feelings and the genres associated with them."[12] In passing the fake as authentic,[13] and in presenting staged events capable of shaping public discussion surrounding what counts as truth,[14] it is no wonder that hoaxers emerge as especially divisive figures.

Hoaxes thus function to split audiences or readerships into two groups: "those who catch on quickly and thereafter read in consonance with the hoaxer as co-conspirators and those who are duped and are later embarrassed by the revelation of the hoax."[15] The potential for a kind of coercion and complicity between hoaxer and audience is most palpable when the hoax is successful in garnering broader attention.[16] The degree to which this complicity remains intact hinges largely on whether the target is perceived to have warranted the attention, and whether the hoax has materialized as an object of instruction or entertainment.[17] Hoaxes can produce even deeper divisions when humorous forms of deception are cast as "inherently mean-spirited and unethical."[18] In matters of heated debate, things can devolve sharply: when hoaxes are orchestrated to show the superiority of one idea over another, the outcome "is only a deepening of polarized views, a hardening of differences, ideological fragmentation, and heated argument."[19]

Because hoaxing most often entails the public shaming or embarrassment of a figure or group through the "comic unmasking of the gullibility of others," hoaxes

do not register as "particularly kind or gentle rhetorical events."[20] Indeed, deceptions of this kind are perceived to be even less welcome and more stinging when the targets involved are experts or professionals in a given field. As many scholars have shown, hoaxes serve as dramatizations of broader contestations over the status of truth through acts that seek to raise questions about the processes and standards by which claims and knowledge are attributed legitimacy.[21] Add to this the notion that hoaxes tend to "flourish in contest cultures" and one can readily appreciate how academia has proven fertile ground for hoaxing.[22] In the realm of higher education, hoaxing can work to reveal not only *who* but also *what* counts as legitimate, teaching us more about "power relations that permeate different professions than about the discourses they target."[23]

For the purposes of this study, I will limit the discussion to hoaxing in academic publishing. One proven strategy embedded in the practice of academic hoaxing is to blindside one's target by catering to the latter's assumptions, near-sightedness, and/or self-importance.[24] To perform admirably in this regard, hoaxers "rely on trust and perform deliberate acts of betrayal."[25] Above and beyond this, success hinges on a number of variables, but one must certainly bypass the following two phases: first, the entrapment period (when an article is submitted to and later published by the targeted journal); second, the reveal phase (when the article is revealed to be fake and a follow-up piece explains the hoaxer's motives and justifications).[26] While the entrapment approach is designed to offer the hoaxer some latitude in explaining the careful reasoning behind the deception, the hoax's public reception is always subject to interpretation and contestation. As Secor and Walsh remind us, the hoaxer cannot control the hoax's broader reception.[27] How the hoaxer and target fare in the public discussion that ensues is very much contingent upon the degree of credibility each figure holds.[28] To better assess the nature of the disruptions created via academic hoaxing, this study situates these instances of deception as "critical incidents" that invite the performance of boundary work and repair across news media and higher education publications.

Boundary Work/Repair: Interpretive Communities and Critical Incidents

This essay explores how academics respond publicly to academic hoaxing, particularly in instances when hoaxes have stirred up controversy and debate. To better apprehend the broader meaning and significance of these discursive flashpoints, I apply theories of boundary work to academic hoaxing (as defined in science and journalism studies). Scholarly discussion of boundary work first appears in Gieryn, who situated the concept as central to understanding how epistemic authority in the sciences is not only created but also reinforced. In rejecting the notion that epistemic authority is anything but predetermined or natural, Gieryn advanced the idea that the larger authority upon which science rests is the outcome of ongoing boundary work on the part of professional scientists regularly engaged in "credibility contests."[29] One such expression of boundary work in the realm of science is the demarcation of real science from pseudo- or non-science. Simply put, these demarcations are the result of the "discursive act of defining what science is and what science can do."[30] As Gieryn argued, the "mediating representations of what science is or what scientists do" are just as important in describing the profession's power, prestige, and influence as is the science emerging from labs and journals.[31]

At its most basic level, this conceptual framework demands a critical inquiry into the factors that make possible the seal of legitimacy for actors, practices, texts, and institutional structures in certain fields. In the field of journalism, for example, debates surrounding "what journalism is and what it should be" are ongoing.[32] In journalism, boundaries are established over time through the discursive setting of

parameters for what is deemed appropriate or acceptable, all of which are subject to ongoing contestation and negotiation.[33] Elsewhere, Duffy and Knight liken *boundaries* to Bourdieu's *fields,* where "various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field";[34] their research suggests that boundary work functions as a vehicle for patrolling, regulating, and maintaining professional identity, not as a path towards greater innovation and experimentation.[35] Boundary work is expressed via metajournalistic discourse (any discourse about journalism) to "reflect embedded assumptions about what journalism is (and what it is not), how it ought to be practiced (and how it ought not), and who belongs within its boundaries (and who does not)."[36] Hence, the boundaries of journalism are socially constructed through the discourse produced by a broad and disparate interpretive community of journalists.[37] The "interpretive community" is built in the interests of shoring up community norms and practices; at their core, "interpretive communities function to build bonds internally while advocating definitional control externally."[38]

Boundary maintenance is used across professions to gain and/or establish cultural authority through symbolic contests that serve to marginalize non-professionals.[39] In establishing the parameters needed to ensure proper oversight of its widely shared norms and practices (e.g., distinguishing between professionals and non-professionals), the community is in a position to identify and respond to deviant incidents or activities. "Critical incidents" refer to events that lead journalists to reflect on the "hows and whys of journalistic practice."[40] Case studies include Princess Diana's death, the rise of WikiLeaks, the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, and the recent debates concerning fake news, among many others. Carlson and Berkowitz explain that these incidents can function as examples of "synecdochic deviance," that is, as evidence of deviance that is perceived to be widespread, not isolated.[41] Expulsion-based boundary work responds to these anomalies by removing actors, practices, or values that fall outside the legitimate journalistic establishment (e.g., "hall of shame" journalists Janet Cooke, Jayson Blair, and Stephen Glass).[42] During these moments, journalists actively reflect on incidents of journalistic deviance to identify what went wrong and how best to re-establish professional norms.[43] These events function as discursive opportunities for journalists to publicly address failures and shortcomings and "to ensure the well-being of their interpretive community by reconsidering, rearticulating, and reinforcing their boundaries and authority."[44] Ultimately, boundary maintenance is enacted to justify longstanding norms and to stave off threats from outsiders.[45]

Finally, as Fakazis' work on "critical events" reveals, these instances also add much needed visibility to competing discourses among journalists as they attempt to redefine what counts as legitimate and acceptable practice within the profession.[46] Building on Fakazis, this study sheds light on the mediating representations of academia as they are produced "downstream" via news sites and academic journals during the critical incident of this study: the "grievance studies" hoax.[47] The debates foregrounded during this period affirm that academia is "not a unified, static entity with fixed borders" but rather a site of ongoing discursive and epistemological contestation.[48] As we will see, some instances of boundary breaching and their subsequent repair are not always clear-cut.[49] What is clear is how academic hoaxing can function as a critical incident that activates boundary work and repair within an interpretive community producing contested appraisals regarding academic knowledge and labor. Due to the wide variety of academics drawn to the public discussion propelled by the hoax (some closer, some further removed from the controversy), this "interpretive community" would ultimately cohere around perceived norms and accepted codes of conduct. Boundary work would thus retain a critical function in enabling academics to publicly identify fault lines and to shore up professional credibility and institutional authority.

Methodology

This study examines the public discourse generated by academics in response to the "grievance studies" hoax. News articles and academic journal editorials from a six-month sample period beginning on October 1, 2018 are analyzed. The sample period attests not only to the hoax's importance as a critical incident around which academics were called upon to discuss specific facets of higher education, it also sheds light on the controversy's capacity to stimulate broader consensus and dissensus. Drawing on Carlson and Berkowitz, the sample is limited to commentaries, opinion columns, editorials, and analyses of news stories by academics that focus on the meaning of the hoax for academia.[50] Discourse analysis, close reading, and thematic analyses of thirty-five texts are used to crystallize and distill the discursive efforts of a disparate group. Given this study's emphasis on the performance of boundary work in relation to journalism studies scholarship, academics' public responses to the hoax are cast as the activities of an "interpretive community," much in the manner journalists engage in metajournalistic discourse. Just as journalists form a vast and diverse group of voices, so too do academics emerge as a cacophonous body of actors. One visible by-product of the metadiscursive activities of such an amorphous group is that while consensus is never achieved, certain actors are given greater leeway to shape or reorient the nature of the discussion. The other defining feature of these discursive activities is that they do not exist in isolation of or apart from competing discussions and debates, but rather in tandem with and in proximity to contestations over what these events mean. The overlapping discourses produced by academics are thus examined as belonging to a small but porous news media ecology. For the purposes of this essay, discussion surrounding the performance of boundary work will be limited to an exploration of academics' published accounts of and public responses to the hoax.

Contextualizing Grievances: Academic Responses to the Hoax

It is difficult to disentangle the first two accounts of this hoax, as they would both ostensibly shape the coverage to follow: the hoaxer's own reveal essay in digital magazine *Areo*, and the *Wall Street Journal* story that outed them. Having first been discovered but not immediately outed by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jillian Kay Melchior for a paper on canine "rape culture," the group was given just enough leeway to prepare its own media-savvy defense: stock photos, press release, comprehensive essay, and exposé-style documentary.[51] In their reveal essay, "Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship," Helen Pluckrose ("exile from the humanities"), James Lindsay ("doctorate in math"), and Peter Boghossian ("non-tenure track professor of philosophy") announced having coauthored and submitted twenty fake articles to peer reviewed journals. The larger argument presented by the group was twofold: that the "grievance studies" peer review system will allow just about anything to pass as knowledge, and that academics in these fields "increasingly bully students, administrators, and other departments into adhering to their worldview."

The following day saw the publication of Melchior's "Fake News Comes to Academia" in the *Wall Street Journal*.[52] Both respective reveal articles would deliver the prototype for virtually all of the news coverage to follow: the hoaxers' own story arc of three "left-leaning" liberal academics who wrote twenty hoax papers that were submitted to peer reviewed journals (seven of which were accepted for publication); in addition, the project was linked to NYU physics professor Alan Sokal's infamous *Social Text* hoax as part of a perceived historical lineage.[53] Melchior approached the story from both divides of the hoax, giving ample room for the hoaxers to vindicate their deception, and offering targeted journal editors an opportunity to denounce the group's violation of "many ethical and academic norms." The article concludes with a rumination on the uncertain futures of the hoaxers who may experience hardship in the wake of their project: Boghossian may be fired or punished by his university, Pluckrose may have a

difficult time being admitted to a doctoral program, and Lindsay risks becoming "an academic pariah," barred from publishing or employment.

Over the next few weeks, the hoax would attract roughly forty news articles from journalists and commentators and over twenty-five responses from academics. For journalists, some care was given to describe the hoax in a fair and balanced register, with the general outline of a story beginning with the exposé of the hoax and hoaxers (including their story, motives, rationale), seguing into a discussion of critiques/criticisms of the project, and ending with some reflection on the state of higher education or academic conduct. The vast majority of the articles surveyed included materials provided by the hoaxers by way of their press kit. Given the sophistication with which the hoaxers were able to present the hoax to their audience, stories often reproduced the language, themes, and arguments set forth by the hoaxers. The latter's own pronouncements so convincingly swayed the vast majority of observers that even the real numbers attached to their efforts have been poorly publicized. As al-Gharbi stated, "the trio made 48 attempts (in 29 journals)."[54] So lackluster was the media coverage in this regard that the hoaxers were routinely taken at their word, with only a few commentators challenging the hoaxers' claims to success.[55] As Christensen and Sears observed of the slanted nature of news reportage, "It is bitterly disappointing that publications that focus on higher education are either so easily hoodwinked or eagerly in on the fix."[56]The discourse generated by the hoax in both academic and popular press literature suggests that many engaged in battles over the meaning of the hoax. Even a cursory survey of articles firmly establishes a broader desire to encapsulate what the hoax means, shows, reveals, overlooks, or as one author put it, what the hoax is really about.[57]

The Many Layers of Academic Responses: Corrupt Scholarship, Peer Review Under Review, Anomalous Activities

Just as hoaxes can flourish in contest cultures and can also add greater visibility to credibility contests, this project would enliven ongoing debates surrounding the reputation, credibility, authority, and ultimately, legitimacy of certain precincts of higher education. On the heels of the hoax's revelation in mainstream media, academics from across disciplines (and from a variety of epistemological, ethical, political, and professional standpoints) emerged as an interpretive community that produced competing views surrounding the acceptability as well as the implications of such actions. Scholars were offered space to comment in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education (Chronicle), Times Higher Ed, Inside Higher Education, Washington Post, New York Times, Boston Globe, The Atlantic, Quillette,* and *Heterodox Academy,* among other publishing outlets. The hoax's significance did not go unnoticed: both *Quillette* and the *Chronicle* published a salon-style set of essays to offer opposing views on the controversy. Among the most important actors engaged in the performance of boundary work, journal editors also created space for discussion and reflection in the pages of various peer reviewed publications: certain targeted journals issued statements of retraction in their pages, and a total of nine substantive editorials about the hoax were published in academic journals.[58] In what follows, I examine the performance of boundary work on the part of academics through three dominant and overlapping themes: the corruption of scholarship, the culture of peer review, and the anomalous nature of the hoax.

The Problem of Corrupt Scholarship

From the outset, the hoaxers argued that their project was designed to expose "corruptions of research," "corrupted research journals," and "corrupt scholarship."[59] The main premise for supporting their overriding thesis—that "grievance studies" scholarship is corrupt—is that so long as scholars are willing to "appropriate the existing literature in the right ways," they can get "absurdities and morally fashionable political ideas published as legitimate academic research."[60] The second charge of corruption is leveled against critical and radical constructivism (or postmodernism), scholarship that they deem is antithetical to science, ethics, and universal liberalism. The academics most supportive of this line of argumentation produced commentaries for *Quillette*, in a special forum curiously published prior to the articles that announced the hoax. Consistent with the magazine's editorial slant, each of the five authors (academics from philosophy, English, and behavioral genetics) cast the real problem as the modern university's embrace of postmodernity and its rejection of reason and empiricism.[61] As Arden (2018) succinctly put it, "reason has been exchanged for ideology."[62] Postmodernists, the perceived targets of the hoax, were taken to task for having "no expertise and no profound understanding."[63] In the most polemical of the five responses, Anomaly argued that the hoax had exposed cultish ideas, fake subjects, and bogus scholarship—all of which are subsidized by taxpayer funding.[64] Overall, *Quillette*'s academic salon produced a consensus of sorts on the merits of the hoax, on the critique of its targets, and in the call for greater accountability on the part of the dominant academic Left in Western universities.[65]

Echoing this chorus of enthusiastic supporters, Ferguson exclaimed in the *Boston Globe* that "they had pulled off one of the greatest hoaxes in the history of academia."[66] The conservative academic establishment comprised of the likes of Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Jordan Peterson, and Alan Sokal celebrated the hoax as further confirmation of the sorry state of "postmodern" academic scholarship. Elsewhere, scholars supportive of the hoax such as Mounk expressed concern for how the targeted journals "failed to distinguish between real scholarship and intellectually vacuous as well as morally troubling bullshit."[67] Pushing the corruption thesis forward in *Psychology Today,* Jussim observed that journals lacking rigorous oversight had succeeded in publishing "extreme, bizarre, and some would argue deeply intolerant and dangerous papers."[68] Heying opined that the hoax is proof that universities have been steered away from being places of scholarship and inquiry to venues for activism and politicization.[69]

Those supportive of the hoax argued that scholarship must be empirical, rigorous, credible, and non-ideological; they also suggested that the hoax offers evidence that breaches in the integrity of these journals and fields are widespread, and proof that these publishing venues are intellectually-compromised. The broader claim being advanced is that postmodern, ideological, and activist scholarship has achieved mainstream status within and beyond the university, and as a result, the corrupt research being produced is seeping into mainstream popular discourse and producing irreparable harm. Ferguson likened the culture to a closed society in which researchers produce "rubbish" that they then teach, the fruits of which are graduates with rubbish degrees who then live and work among the rest of us.[70] The larger stakes of these public debates are expressed by Anomaly: "Trendy disciplines with names that end with the word 'studies,'" he asserted, should be defunded, a sentiment echoed by the hoaxers.[71] *Quillette*'s salon thus figured as the first of many expressions of boundary work regarding the hoax: critiques of postmodernist scholarship, ideological blind spots in research, and the failures of peer review to detect intellectually troubling and dangerous ideas represented key elements associated with the broader charge of corrupt scholarship in "grievance studies" fields.

Critics of the hoax would also take up the issue of corrupt scholarship, albeit from a different set of perspectives. One week after revelation of the hoax, the *Chronicle* would follow suit with a forum of its own, adding the perspectives of seven academics to the mix. The notable diversity of this group (scholars of political science, biology, history, sociology, and gender studies) certainly

increased the range of responses. The hoaxers' arguments were largely discredited by many commentators who described the project as being ethically indefensible and as a dangerous exercise in the perversion of the peer review process. If *Quillette* commentators had been quick to denounce postmodernism and its pseudo-scholarship, certain *Chronicle* authors chose to contextualize the hoax, first, as academic misconduct and, second, as a coordinated effort to devalue and defund the humanities.[72]

For these commentators, the corruption of scholarship theme would pivot around the overlapping issues of academic dishonesty, research misconduct, and fraud. Bergstrom described the group's activities as "straight-up academic misconduct"; Petrzela conceived of the project as "outlandish arguments founded on fake data"; and in addition to the charge of data falsification, Spruce, Ojeda, and Breslow added the misrepresentation of author identities (credentials and affiliations) and the presentation of bad-faith submissions as problematic breaches.[73] A group of anonymous scholars at Portland State University (colleagues of Boghossian) published a harsh indictment of the group's activities, citing the work as "junk pieces" seeking to obfuscate, and as falsified research best referred to as fraud.[74] Such interpretations were unsurprising because Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian invited its audience to consider the hoax as research—after all, they presented the project as "reflexive ethnography." In doing so, the group was criticized for engaging in ethnographic research without research ethics approval.[75] Aside from engaging in a dubious form of ethnographic research, the group's methodology was duly criticized for lacking a control group for the experiment.[76] That the group received funding from anonymous "benefactors" to work on the project for one year would also invite additional criticism regarding the lack of ethics.[77] As al-Gharbi pointed out, research funding is typically disclosed upon submission and publication for several reasons, including the elimination of conflicts-of-interest.[78] Yet another way of flagging the work as corrupt was to clarify that the hoaxers were not experts or even scholars of the work they were critiquing, rendering criticisms about these disciplines as occupying shaky ground.[79]

Evidence of corrupt and/or unethical conduct was also tied to the group's perceived motives and motivations. al-Gharbi insisted that there are ways to critique a field via hoaxing or deception without engaging in unethical conduct: the group could have opted to withdraw the articles prior to publication and to alert the editors—they merely chose not to.[80] The reality, Phipps argued in *Times Higher Education,* is that "despite their claim to be engaging in 'good-faith' critique, it's clear that Pluckrose, Lindsay and Boghossian actually aim to undermine fields they have political—not scholarly—objections to."[81] Elsewhere, Denzin and Giardina documented the "fundamental dishonesty at play": the hoaxers had gone to great lengths to falsely show that researchers in qualitative fields willfully ignore the evidence/findings of their own studies to make arguments that align with their ideological positions.[82] Indeed, Denzin and Giardina were careful to remind both the hoaxers and the qualitative researchers they were addressing that "that is not how critical scholarship works!"

Editorial responses attempted to connect academic hoaxing with research misconduct and fraud. For example, Grech, in an article in *Early Human Development*, positioned the hoax/ers in tandem with other notable scandals in academic publishing, namely, the Sokal Affair, a Korean cloning scandal, and the Andrew Wakefield autism vaccine controversy. Grech openly discouraged researchers from engaging in hoaxes of any kind, as they can entail serious repercussions and unintended consequences. Invoking these fraudulent activities, Grech argued that "academics have an ethical responsibility to ensure the highest uncompromising standards of research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting."[83] Anything short of this would constitute harm to science as a whole, resulting in diminished public trust in institutions. The boundary work performed in the *Chronicle* and in subsequent editorial responses serves as a counterpoint to the *Quillette* forum, the former positioning the corruption of scholarship as akin to the manifestation of unwelcome corrupt

behaviors, practices, protocols, and politics—at once false, dishonest, unethical, and harmful. The boundary work expressed to validate or marginalize certain forms of scholarly publishing activities would also appear alongside discussions regarding acceptable and unethical behavior in the realm of peer review, to which we now turn.

"Fix This Problem": Peer Review Under Review

The second major "boundary work" theme to emerge in relation to the hoax concerns peer review. Because the fundamental premise of the hoax was to expose the corruption across disciplines through the publishing activities of academic journals, peer review became a central point of discussion and deliberation. Overall, the failures of peer review emerged as primary points of concern—with the majority expressing a desire to see greater care and handling in these matters. Defenders of the hoax saw merit in the use of deception as a means of exposing the laziness, bias, and self-importance of the targeted journals and disciplines. The hoax was evidence of the growing proliferation of "drivel" too keenly "praised to the skies by academic peer reviewers"[84] and of the growing proliferation of "pseudo-philosophy."[85] Another notable aspect of the responses was the characterization of the hoax as being effective, but only to a point. These hoax articles may have been accepted in the journals of marginalized subfields in the humanities, but they would have never "penetrated the leading journals of more traditional disciplines."[86] Drezner's *Washington Post* critique of the project's weaknesses reaffirmed that hoaxes of this quality would never make it through peer review in sociology, economics, or chemistry. For academics sympathetic to this line of argumentation, journals having fallen victim to the deception were cast as some combination of negligent, complicit, or too easily amenable. Arden stated the case as such: "It looks like a case of reviewers asleep at the wheel."[87]

If peer review remained a topic of concern for academics, it certainly found expression in several statements regarding the vulnerabilities of the system. In a *Cultural Studies* editorial, Striphas pinpointed the inherent weaknesses of the scholarly publishing ecosystem: namely, that the mass profusion of journals and series had produced far more opportunities for work that might once have been excluded from academic publishing to be published.[88] In Lichtenstein's view, the hoax was more an indictment of the growing hegemony of consolidated journal publishing and editorial management systems than it was proof of any corrupt scholarship in the humanities.[89] More than anything, the hoax was shown to reveal persistent flaws and inconsistencies in peer review: a weak but interesting enough manuscript being sent out rather than desk rejected; a reviewer offering supportive albeit critical feedback; a peer review process failing to "uncover outright fraud,"[90] and so on. At its core, wrote Piedra in an editorial in *Qualitative Social Work,* the system relies on human judgment, good will, scholarly integrity, and intellectual honesty—all of which are susceptible to distortion.[91]

During this period, academics also grappled with the reality that the peer review system has been greatly compromised by notable instances of fraud, research misconduct, and academic dishonesty manifest across all disciplines and fields. In a letter to the *Chronicle*, Collins observed that "even 'objective' research can be done in bad faith"—citing a recent Harvard Medical School scandal in which thirty-one cardiology publications based on fabricated research were called to be retracted.[92] In instances when poor papers do make it through the system, the consequences can be far-reaching: external critique overrides academic expertise, authority is compromised or diminished, and social crises abound.[93] If research misconduct could be observed from all corners of academia, perhaps the political and ideological motivations of the hoax were worthy of greater scrutiny. Denzin and Giardina, for example, foregrounded just how politically

charged the landscape of higher education is at the present moment, surveying a wide range of attacks against the humanities and social sciences—all in some way amplified by the hoax.[94] For Spruce, Ojeda, and Breslow, the hoax served as a dishonest act intentionally designed to serve political ends: "Peer review is not simply about checks and balances, it is a process which relies on the principles of good faith and honesty, something that they intentionally corrupted."[95]

In the absence of trust and good faith, the hoax revealed more about the conditions of academic labor and the escalating demands of unpaid peer review.[96] Bergstrom argued that the hoaxers willfully betrayed "numerous editors and dozens of unconsenting peer reviewers [who] invested large amounts of time on bad-faith submissions."[97] Yoder, editor of the journal *Sex Roles*, described her role in a systematic vetting process that included desk-rejecting a prior submission, only to send out a second article (the ethnography of 'breastaurants') to three well-established experts.[98] The paper was accepted for publication after three rounds of intense revisions and careful editorial checking. Yoder went to great lengths to affirm the due diligence shown during the peer review process, offering to publicly share the details of the article's editorial processing. Of the twenty-six hoax articles written, eleven of the manuscripts received a total of ninety-seven suggestions of new scholarly literature; one article was submitted to two journals, receiving a total of six reviews.[99] The authors' "bad-faith" submissions exploited vulnerabilities in the process and severely compromised the integrity and trust that inform author-reviewer relations. As the hoax exposé unfolded, the hoaxers were also criticized for unethically drawing upon reviewer comments from a rejected paper to put forward an indictment of a targeted journal and field (sociology). In his work as peer reviewer for one of the journals, Schieber recounts having flagged one of the hoax submissions as being odd, ultimately recommending the article be rejected for publication.[100] As a first-time reviewer, he reflected on how best to offer a respectful and constructive rejection of the manuscript. In *n+1,* Afinogenov acknowledged how peer review comments figured as "a record of the careful emotional labor the journals' unpaid reviewers performed on behalf of someone they assumed was a struggling junior colleague."[101]

Such characterizations come closest to articulating the core rationale of the peer review system across disciplines. According to Bergstrom, "The purpose of peer review is first and foremost to improve manuscripts."[102] As far as boundary repair is concerned, this amorphous chorus of commentators was largely interested in presenting a critique of peer review (real and ideal) in the interests of advancing much needed solutions. The work to be done, Piedra noted, is to reaffirm the importance of peer review as a trusted and proven mechanism to "evaluate scholarship and *improve* promising pre-publication manuscripts."[103] For journals and disciplines to sufficiently protect themselves, they must institute "fail-safe" processes of their own, including editorial gatekeeping, rigorous peer review, and the post-acceptance review of research materials.[104] In responding to the hoaxers' assertion that universities should "fix this problem," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* editor Sandra Thomas suggested that the solution lies with the editors and reviewers of academic journals.[105] To minimize the appearance of bias, reviewers should be called upon to decline offers to review work for which they hold either favorable or negative reactions. In addition, journal editors must not only continue to evaluate the quality and breadth of peer evaluations, they must also offer training, feedback, and mentorship to their reviewers.[106] Any failure to uphold the standards and rigors of peer review, she concluded, could lead to the contamination of the scholarly literature.

To mitigate against future deceptions, academics proposed a number of solutions and improvements: the implementation of an open peer review system; increased opportunities for authors to recommend potential reviewers; combining open access publishing with multiple iterations of public peer review discussion; and ethical checks and acknowledgments on the part of authors.[107] Petrzela, for one, stated that there's "no excuse for shoddy peer review," hopeful that the hoax might "inspire new, more intense forms of scrutiny" between major and minor

(sub)fields.[108] To produce the greatest transparency, Arden went so far as to call upon journals and publishers to remove paywalls so as to make academic literature freely available to the public; doing so would make the intellectual bankruptcy of compromised journals most apparent. For all the above misgivings about ongoing challenges and failures, the likes of Grech would affirm the strengths of the peer review system to uphold epistemological credibility and authority—even in a culture vulnerable to academic hoaxes and fraud.

On the question of the value of peer review, the hoax is instructive in that it lays bare the systemic vulnerabilities inherent in the system, but it also reaffirms the crucial role of reviewers, editors, and authors laboring to produce important contributions to knowledge. Karen Staller, co-editor of *Qualitative Social Work,* penned an editorial on the internal dynamics of peer review, albeit from the perspective of the referees.[109] In her reflection on the hoax and its implications for academia, Staller pointed to how the social and professional dynamics at work within peer review could be negatively impacted as a result of the hoax. Instead of approaching authors in terms of good intentions and their submissions in terms of good faith, the culture of peer review could just as easily begin on "presumptions of deception, fraud, and untruthfulness."[110] To submit to a culture rooted in suspicion rather than honesty or integrity would transform university communities into "more dangerous and less civil places."[111] To avoid this undesirable outcome, the good will and judgment expressed by editors and reviewers must come to represent the norm in the culture of peer review. Importantly, correctives to the grievances addressed via the hoax can and do take shape in unexciting ways that do not involve ridicule, shame, or embarrassment. Striphas reinforced this point in drawing on the hoax as a rallying point for scholarly communities to increase their investments in "maintaining, repairing, and renovating the material, discursive, and interpersonal supports" that are the hallmark of academic life.[112]

Anomalous Activities

Like the critical incidents and events outlined above, hoaxes constitute aberrations within a given field, norm, or practice; they also come to represent anomalies in otherwise stable realms of representation. Although hoaxing can be regarded as a ubiquitous cultural form, its prevalence is far less well established in academia. When hoaxes do arise in higher education, however, these anomalous cases tend to garner greater attention. So rare are hoaxes in academia that history professors such as Smith (2018) immediately championed hoaxing as an ingenious rhetorical form capable of "breathing new life into the carcass of history" and into the life of ideas.[113] It is thus unsurprising that the Sokal Affair (or *Social Text* hoax) emerged as the primary touchstone and point of comparison for this hoax. Commentators observed that Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian's more elaborate project shared a general blueprint with Sokal's. Reference to other notable hoaxes was muted. The relatively low number of academic hoaxes carried out over the past three decades offers a baseline for thinking about how these forms of deception come to register as aberration or anomaly. According to the hoaxers, who were given space in *USA Today* to publish an opinion piece about their project, anomalies are best conceived of as "fringe theories" originating in academic journals, funneled through "a broken system," and later accepted as tomorrow's buzzwords.[114] Concepts such as toxic masculinity, white fragility, cultural appropriation, and microaggressions, they contend, have helped shape "cynically biased perspectives on men, masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness." In this view, perceived anomalies such as fringe theories occupy a crucial place in popular media discourse because they have the power to shape much larger debates and discussions. Because the hoaxers present these buzzwords as ill-conceived and harmful, any inroads these theories make pose an affront to Western empiricism and epistemology.[115] The hoax's success is most acutely observed in the "feeding of a popular narrative on the right that

universities are overrun by 'tenured radicals' hawking fringe ideas to their innocent students."[116]

The hoax as anomaly became a singularly powerful point that eventually gave rise to a number of counterpoints. If the hoaxers positioned the corruption of scholarship in the humanities as representing a larger expression of disrepute on the academic left, their critics argued that such synecdochic examples permeate across all fields, especially in purportedly non-ideological and empirical ones. For Lăzăroiu, "A sting run on practically any empirical discipline would have returned the same outcomes" due to the vulnerabilities of the peer review system.[117] Addressing researchers engaging in both qualitative and quantitative analyses, Yoder presented her case that these breaches are likely to occur in any discipline where actors are willing to fabricate or modify datasets.[118] To celebrate the efforts of fraudsters in any academic field, she warned, is to undermine the importance of evidence-based scholarship. What is consistently clear in cases of research misconduct and fraud is the extreme lengths to which fraudsters will go to have something bogus published.[119] Such transgressive behavior has incited strong criticism from academics, but certain precincts (e.g., the sciences) have been more successful in shielding and deflecting their deviance.[120]

In the context of this study, the hoaxers were described as outsiders knowingly engaging in unethical behavior. Lăzăroiu, for example, noted the vigor with which the hoaxers "disregarded pivotal professional and ethical principles," a concession that opened the door for them to ridicule and mock their targets, engage in data fabrication, and place unnecessary additional strains on peer reviewers.[121] Striphas described the hoaxers as "abyss-artists" and likened them to Sokal, whose *Social Text* hoax was designed "to aggrandize himself and his own political positions by attempting to burn [the cultural studies] field to the ground";[122] for Pluckrose and company, the point of their hoax was cruelty, that is, the shame and humiliation of their targets.[123] Piedra depicted the group as "outside agitators" seeking to undermine the work of practitioner-scholars whose work departs from traditional norms and produces alternative perspectives.[124] Thomas referred to the scandal as an "appalling hoax" carried out by "three conspirators."[125] Finally, Yoder referred to the hoaxers as showing a "complete lack of integrity" and as proving "so maliciously deceitful" that they were able to "scam the system" by submitting fraudulent research for consideration.[126]

The appearance of anomalies encouraged the performance of boundary work; it also instigated boundary repair, much of which cast the broader controversy as an opportunity to present a vision for increased ethical considerations, collegiality, and service. Despite the unwelcome manner in which the critique was leveled, Piedra insisted that the event should give researchers reason to pause. Because breaches of professional trust are not easily repaired, Afinogenov held up the example of academics performing a "duty of care for authors" within the peer review process.[127] Writing in *American Historical Review,* editor Alex Lichtenstein surmised that although history may be "a field relatively immune to such malicious practices," like many other fields its vulnerability can be seen in its predisposition to publishing new and original work.[128] Despite the creation of peer review safeguards to ensure credibility, trust among academics remained fundamental to ensuring "faith in knowledge and research."[129] Among many of the more hopeful responses to the scandal, Denzin and Giardina made light of these grievances to present a challenge to qualitative researchers, to reaffirm the role of critical researchers in their respective fields: "We still have a job do to. Let's get to it."[130]

Repairing Peer Review, Upholding the Institution

The sensational story arc, the engineered spectacle and ensuing controversy, as well as the engaged public discussion and debate help firmly situate this hoax as a "critical incident" that incited the academic community "to reflect on its practices and protect its ranks."[131] The event has proven to be a rich site from which to interpret how academics make sense of both deception and hoaxing via metadiscourse, especially in opinion pieces and editorials. In framing academics as an "interpretive community" responding to a critical incident, this study highlights the extent to which responses to deception, hoaxing, and misconduct are very much contingent upon the actors involved. For example, academics publishing responses in *Quillette* differed in tone and outlook from scholars offering comment in the *Chronicle*. Whereas scholars in *Quillette* might agree that postmodern (read: critical constructivist/social constructionist) scholarship has undermined the role of empiricism and scientific research, researchers in the *Chronicle* might hold differing views surrounding the value of different forms of critical inquiry.

Others yet championed the ways in which the hoaxers struck a blow against ideological research, and this proved to be an important strand of the larger debate. The hoaxers and their supporters argued that with the right vocabulary and with the ability to flatter the ideological sensibilities of peer reviewers and editors, publication in a "grievance studies" journal—no matter the content—was most assured. Such bad-faith submissions were challenged on a number of fronts, from those decrying data fabrication and manipulation as deeply unethical practices to others criticizing the lack of integrity involved in subverting the peer review process. The ethical and epistemological fault lines were being actively drawn by a whole range of actors, virtually all of whom were writing as insiders of the institution. While the boundary work performed by this disparate group lacked coherence overall, discussion regarding what constitutes both acceptable conduct and legitimate research formed core aspects of the debates. The academic hoax designed by Pluckrose, Lindsay, and Boghossian has given greater visibility to the "credibility contests"[132] and "contest cultures"[133] that exist in higher education today, many of which remain unsettled.

Ultimately, the performance of boundary work and boundary repair was most clearly observed in the editorials published in academic journals, many of which were either directly or indirectly targeted via the hoax. Nowhere was the issue of peer review more apparent than in the reflections and musings of journal editors. In these deliberations, editors described the hoaxers as anomalous actors engaged in deviant activities; they were characterized as outside agitators, conspirators, abyss-artists, and bad-faith actors working to explicitly undermine the epistemological foundations of already marginalized (sub)fields. Editors affirmed their practices and protocols were sound, albeit vulnerable to attack. Although fallible, editors and reviewers were said to have approached their duties with reverence and integrity. Despite the vulnerabilities exploited and made visible by the hoax, boundary work served to reinforce the legitimacy of peer review, at the same time that various actors proposed solutions, reinforcements, or changes. In attempting to have the hoaxers symbolically removed or expulsed from the field(s) to which they did not belong, editors worked to repair the boundaries of acceptable practice in order to reaffirm their authority and credibility in their respective research communities. Such activities are consistent with the expulsion-based boundary work described in Carlson and Berkowitz wherein anomalous bad faith actors are repudiated for engaging in dubious or unethical practices.[134] In disavowing the fundamental dishonesty and the malicious deceit of the hoaxers, editors chose to highlight the core aspects of shared academic life that needed to be cultivated and maintained, chief among them collegiality and trust in the production of knowledge.

Conclusion

In October 2018, academics from across the spectrum seized the opportunity to address an expansive and complex hoax in various fora—including but not limited to editorials and opinion pieces in news outlets and higher education trade publications. A majority of responses took issue with the hoax for a variety of reasons: namely, on grounds of unethical behavior, flawed methodology, and mean-spiritedness. Academic supporters of the hoax celebrated the ingenuity and cleverness involved in exposing what they deemed the weakest scholarly disciplines and publishing venues. For the latter, the hoax confirmed the lack of rigor, integrity, and credibility in the humanities and social sciences.

What we learn in appraising the public statements of academics during this period is that the performance of boundary work is most expressly articulated by the actors most closely aligned with academia and/or academic publishing. The actors with the deepest investments in upholding the peer review system and academic scholarship make use of the most official channels and venues to perform boundary work, to reaffirm the importance of scholarly publication, as well as their place within it. The outsider-anomalous actors are also cast as having deep commitments to scholarship (three scholars: two of whom have earned doctorates) but deploy non-conforming practices (the hoax), and make use of untraditional platforms and venues to challenge the boundaries of certain areas of scholarship.

The public statements of this "interpretive community" confirm that although the institution of academic publishing is inherently flawed, peer review remains a trusted and proven system. The hoaxers may have made a larger cautionary point that real scholarship can at times be replaced with rhetoric that aligns with one's political beliefs;[135] they may not, however, have achieved their stated objectives of "exposing the reality of grievance studies, which is corrupting academic research."[136] For the vast majority of academics, the peer review system works in the most established disciplines and publishing venues. Only the most vulnerable to deception were taken in by the hoax, and even those deceived still affirmed having followed rigorous protocols. Breaches in trust and deviations from professional norms made possible the acceptance of seven hoax articles through peer review. These breaches precipitated heated public discussion and sustained calls for boundary repair. As much as the hoaxers labored to expose the perceived corruption of humanities and social sciences research, the hoax was most effective in provoking the performance of boundary work, especially in terms of upholding longstanding norms and ideals tied to peer review and academic labor. Future studies concerning the use of deception in academic research and labor would benefit from the scholarship on hoaxing and boundary work. Although this study has focused exclusively on published commentaries, opinion columns, and editorials, future research on the discourse generated via social media would assist in expanding our understanding of the boundary work performed by academics.

On a final note, the "grievance studies" hoax represents a significant moment of reflection for humanities and social sciences researchers, especially cultural studies scholars. Although academics were largely successful in reaffirming the boundaries surrounding acceptable practices in academic publishing and labor within academia, the hoaxers were equally successful in discrediting and downright ridiculing the reputation of certain journals and fields in and across popular Internet media. Since the hoax, the group has earned unparalleled visibility through appearances on the Joe Rogan Experience podcast and the Jordan Peterson YouTube channel, securing them hundreds of thousands of listeners and viewers across platforms—not to mention their growing popularity on Twitter. The hoaxers have most certainly connected with publics far beyond academia, but who no less are interested in seeing corners of higher education painted with the same faulty brushwork. There is little doubt that the "grievance studies" term will continue to be taken up by the (far) right. The byline in the first *New York Times* piece on the hoax announced "another culture war, another hoax inflicted on left-wing academics."[137] The academic culture wars first stoked by the Sokal Affair in the 1990s have returned with even greater force. If the goal

of this incarnation was to discredit, call into question, and dismiss research on the Left, the hoax should give cultural studies scholars a moment to pause and reflect on how best to respond to these antagonistic forces. As Staller declared in her post-hoax editorial, "After creating a brief uproar in the mainstream media, the topic has now been left to academics to ponder its implications."[138] How academics respond to the ripple effects of this hoax remains to be seen.

Notes

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47. Fakazis, "Janet Malcolm," 19. ↩

48. Fakazis, "Janet Malcolm," 19. ↩

49. Fakazis, "Janet Malcolm," 20. ↩

50. Carlson and Berkowitz, "Emperor Lost His Clothes." ↩

51. At the time of writing, the first exposé-style video produced by group collaborator Mike Nayna has been viewed over 945,000 times on YouTube alone ("Academics expose

corruption in Grievance Studies," https://youtu.be/kVk9a5Jcd1k < https://urldefense.com/v3/__https://youtu.be/kVk9a5Jcd1k__;!!KwNVnqRv!TbPupZqYfFUyF024l3tRHfLx37mYpjuF). ↪

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53. Sokal is referred to as the NYU physicist responsible for a 1996 hoax that targeted Duke University Press journal, *Social Text*. By interviewing Sokal for the piece, Melchior establishes two finer points of the academic hoax: first, these deceptions incur breaches of trust and produce ethical quandaries, and second, they can be used to criticize academic subcultures that typically ignore or deflect external criticism. For a substantive overview of the Sokal hoax, see J. D. Slack and M. M. Semati, "Intellectual and Political Hygiene: The 'Sokal Affair,'" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14, no. 3 (1997): 201–227, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039709367012; and Secor and L. Walsh, "A Rhetorical Perspective." ↪

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